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AUTHOR Harper, Betty
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ABSTRACT

To determine how college instructors evaluate student learning in their reading methods course, a questionnaire was administered to 15 instructors of elementary, and 11 instructors of secondary, reading methods courses. The instrument was divided into five sections for the purpose of collecting the following data: (1) course design and components of the final course grade, (2) testing procedures and item types, (3) evaluation forms for written papers and projects, (4) procedures used in evaluating teaching experiences, and (5) related evaluation procedures and concerns. Study findings indicated that the instructors were consistently evaluating student progress and providing feedback. All of the instructors used paper-and-pencil tests that evaluated student ability to apply skills as well as to recall information. A majority also used written papers and projects to evaluate learning, frequently giving an item-by-item analysis of the work in addition to general written comments. Besides these methods, a minority of instructors also used microteaching, simulated or field-based teaching experiences, and class participation in analyzing student progress. While the study revealed that reading faculty are conscientiously evaluating students, instructors themselves suggest that defining course objectives, class assignments, and assessment procedures more clearly would strengthen grading procedures. (MM)

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EVALUATING STUDENT PROGRESS IN UNDERGRADUATE READING METHODS COURSES: A SURVEY OF TWENTY-SIX INSTRUCTORS

Betty Harper

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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EVALUATING STUDENT PROGRESS IN UNDERGRADUATE READING METHODS COURSES:

A SURVEY OF TWENTY-SIX INSTRUCTORS

In 1968 Weintraub advocated that professional methods courses must not only educate for application to the classroom, but must include an evaluation of students' ability to apply knowledge. Yet, a decade later, a nationwide survey of preservice teacher education (Joyce, Yarger, Howey, Harbeck, and Kluwen, 1977) revealed that: (a) a priority is placed on factual mastery of subject matter, (b) tests are paper-and pencil measures, and (c) a competency-oriented modular approach is neither widely nor effectively implemented. Although teacher education continues to be general and inductive, no research describes how student learning is evaluated in undergraduate reading methods courses. Rather, the literature reveals a proliferation of articles itemizing competencies to be included in these courses while very few instructors address the evaluation of overall performance in their courses (Stiegliz, Rude, Crandall, and Starring, 1974-76; Askov, Singh, and Clemens, 1978). Thus, the present study represents an initial effort to gain some perspective on what is being done.

A questionnaire was constructed and instructors were surveyed to determine how they evaluate the learning of students in their reading methods courses. The instrument was divided into five sections for the purpose of collecting the following data:

1. Course design and components of the final course grade
2. Testing procedures and item type(s)
3. Evaluation forms for written papers and projects
4. Procedures used in evaluating teaching experiences
5. Related evaluation procedures and concerns

Content validity for the instrument was established through: (a) a review of the literature to determine the content/experiences provided in basic reading courses and to identify assessment techniques, (b) on-site visits with

reading instructors in three universities, and (c) a review of the instrument by reading instructors. Department chairpersons in 24 colleges and universities in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa were contacted and requested to give a copy of the survey form to appropriate faculty members. Although 33 instructors returned their questionnaries only responses of the 15 instructors of elementary reading methods courses and the 11 instructors of secondary reading methods courses are reported in this study.

These results are reported item-by-item for the five sections of the instrument. Because of the nature of the instrument and size of the sample, percentages and raw scores were used to summarize the data.

Responses to items in Section One indicated that: (a) only five (19 percent) of the instructors have a modular designed course and (b) components most often combined for the final course grade, along with the percentage of instructors using them are:

Component	Percentage
Tests	100
Written papers/projects	85
Microteaching/simulations	15
Field-based teaching	31
Class participation	23

Eleven instructors base the grade solely on tests and written papers/projects while four instructors include class participation with these two components. Eight instructors combine tests, written papers/projects and microteaching/simulation or field-based teaching (usually field-based, rarely both). Two instructors base the grade on tests and teaching experiences while one instructor bases it on midterm and final tests. For this sample at least, the data is consistent with that observed by Joyce, et al. (1977). A traditional course

organization is retained, paper-and-pencil tests are used for assessment, and techniques such as microteaching/simulation are less often used.

The following table displays how respondents are distributed in terms of the weight they assign to each component for determination of the final grade.

TABLE I

Number of Instructors Assigning Each Percentage Weight to Each Component

Component	Number by Percentage Weight									
	1-10	11-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	61-70	71-80	81-90	91-100
Tests	0	2	6	3	11	3	1	0	0	1
Written Papers/ Projects	0	1	7	3	7	1	1	2	1	0
Microteaching/ Simulations	1	2	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Field-based Teaching	0	2	3	1	2	0	0	0	0	0
Class Participation	2	2	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

Although the weight assigned to different components varies, there is a tendency to weigh tests as 50 to 60 percent of the final grade. Written papers/projects usually comprise from 25 percent to 50 percent of the final course grade.

Section Two requested information about testing: (a) when tests are administered, (b) types of items used, and (c) skill measure. Eighteen instructors indicated that only a midterm and a final are given. Seven instructors test more frequently while one instructor gives only a final exam.

A combination of objective and essay items tend to comprise both the midterm and final exams. While essay tests are used somewhat less as final exams, they are rarely used as a midterm. On the other hand, tests given throughout the term

tend to vary. But, regardless of the item type(s) used, most instructors measure both recall and application of information on their tests.

In Section Three instructors reported the form of evaluation used for written papers and projects. Forms presented and reported were: written comments ("overall impression"), item-by-item analysis, checklists, rating scales, and other.

A total of 15 instructors require both written papers and projects. Six assign projects, three assign written papers, and two require neither papers nor projects.

Almost all instructors provide written comments ("overal impression") for both written papers and projects. About half of the instructors include written analysis which may be in the form of a rating scale or check list.

In Section Four, instructors indicated how students' microteaching/simulation and field-based teaching (as well as correspondent lesson plans) is evaluated. The number of instructors of elementary and secondary reading methods courses utilizing these experiences are:

	Elementary	Secondary
Microteaching/Simulation ONLY	0	2
Field-based ONLY	8	0
Microteaching/Simulation AND Field-based	4	0
NO experiences	3	9

Although the data for this section was limited, it appears that the evaluation of microteaching/simulation usually includes peer and self evaluation. While there is a tendency for both the instructor and student to evaluate the field-based experience, the cooperating teacher often functions with the instructor in this capacity. On the whole, the evaluation form for lesson plans is a written critique. But, for field-based lesson plans (as well as field experiences) conferences are

often included. Overall, rating scales and checklists are used less frequently.

Additional information supplied by respondents indicates that:

1. The number of microteaching/simulation experiences range from 1-5.
2. Field-based teaching may extend from two weeks to a semester, with a mean of eight weeks and a mode of ten weeks. Minutes per week range fromm 30-300.
3. The field-based experience is almost exclusively at one grade level. The focus is on either small group teaching or one-to-one tutoring. Few students have both experiences.

The first part of Section Five identified items related to evaluation procedures with responses forced into yes, no, or not applicable categories. The second part requested responses to two open-ended questions. Responses to the ten items are as follows:

<u>A majority of instructors</u>

- provide criteria for grading written papers/projects when directions are given. (100 percent)
- specify the objectives for their course. (97 percent)
- give grades to written assignments which reflect mechanics of expression: e.g., spelling, grammar, legibility. (85 percent)

<u>About half the instructors</u>

- allow students to redo inadequate assignments for higher grades.
- provide a choice of essay questions of exams.
- give the initial test early in the term.
- give a final exam that is comprehensive.
-define what each characteristic on the rating scale represents.

A minority of instructors (19 percent)

- allow students to retake tests or alternate forms.

- allow students to choose alternative assessments for required objectives.

In response to the question, "What factors contributed to your decision to evaluate students as you do?" instructors commented:

"Experience."

"Efficiency."

"Course objectives."

"Just fits my style."

"Need for specific feedback."

"Instructional value of evaluation."

"Search for equity in grading practices."

"Desire for relative objectivity in evaluation."

"Courses I have taken in evaluation techniques."

"Somewhat defensive reaction to previous comments of students--almost an effort at complaint proof reading (if that's possible)."

"A variety of types of assignments and tests more accurately evaluate a student's knowledge and ability."

"Students need to have a variety of experiences in a reading methods course and should be evaluated on those papers, lesson plans, tests, and practicum experiences."

"Students work more enthusiastically and do the things that are likely to improve their ability to teach when assignments (and assessment procedures) are clearly spelled out."

In response to the question, "What, if any, aspects of your grading system do you and/or your students find problematic?" instructors commented:

"Criteria for grading."

"Teaching performance is sometimes difficult to quantify."

"Evaluating on-the-scene teaching performance when classrooms in which students are teaching vary greatly."

"Consistency in grading written and project work and essay tests--fair assessment across students."

"The frustration that exists when students do not reach the 'high' grade they felt they were working for."

"Ability to evaluate progress during course when students vary widely in pre-existing knowledge."

"Relative weights of projects--how to weigh them fairly."

"The glib ones would like more essay exams; even though they admit they're less reliable and/or valid."

"Keeping students informed as to their relative position on the class curve."

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study would indicate that instructors of reading methods courses are consistently evaluating student progress and providing feedback to their students. All of the instructors use paper-and-pencil tests and a majority use written paper/projects to evaluate learning. Most tests used tap application level skill, as well as recall of information. It would appear that these instructors are measuring students' ability to understand and to relate what is learned to applied setting. Many also do an item-by-item analysis as well as the written comments ("overall impression") for written papers and/or projects. While the general written comments favored by many instructors may not provide helpful feedback, (Allington, 1974) the inclusion of more definitive data suggest these instructors are concerned indirecting student efforts to need correction.

Testing at shorter intervals throughtout the course would be preferable to the midterm and final most of the instructors implement. More frequent testing

not only allows one to sample content more intensively, but also promotes a more reliable basis for evaluation (Ebel, 1972, p. 99). Since students actually prefer multiple opportunities for reaching competency on objectives (Askov, et al., 1978), instructors might reconsider their practices regarding the retaking of tests or alternate forms. Finally, providing optional essay questions is a questionable practice because valid comparisons of achievement cannot be made (Mehrens and Lehmann, 1973, p. 222).

Although demonstration of teaching performance, both microteaching/simulation and field-based, would appear to be a necessary component in all undergraduate reading methods courses, such experiences may not be utilized. Instructive evaluation of teaching performance at the microteaching/simulation level would seem to be a logical interim step to achieving expertise in actual instruction with children. Also, if teaching experiences were incorporated in secondary reading courses, students' understanding of the course content as well as their performance in the classroom would be increased. Finally, the troublesome problem of quantifying students' teaching performance might be alleviated through the application of a common set of criteria by the instructor, cooperating teacher, and student in the form of a rating scale.

The problemantic aspects of obtaining efficiency, consistency, and objectivity in evaluation, as well as student frustration when not achieving the desired grade, were cited by a number of instructors. Inherent in their comments they expressed the means for reducing these problems as: (a) clearly defining course objectives, (b) specifically spelling out assignments and assessment procedures, and (c) providing feedback aimed at helping students achieve greater competency.

Thus, while this survey revealed that these reading faculty are conscientiously evaluating student progress, it would appear that some procedures could be

strengthened. Hopefully, evaluative practices which ensure a high level of teaching competence in students will increasingly be incorporated in reading methods courses.

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